

BOOK REVIEW: *Becoming Yellow* – A Short History of Racial Thinking

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Racism has been an epidemic and a main human rights issue that still affects us today. It has always been a major issue throughout history because there has been mistrust between different races, since people tend not to trust or align themselves with people or situations that differ from their own. Discrimination can extend to religious differences, differences in facial or body features, skin color, difference in mannerisms, and other cultural aspects. These racist notions have led to various acts of violence, wars, and mistreatment of human beings throughout history. In his book *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking*, Michael Keevak (a professor of foreign languages at the National Taiwan University) thoroughly analyzed the history of the skin color “yellow” and how that has affected Western opinions of East Asians. Identifying groups according to skin color not only impacts the people being identified, but also has a psychological effect on outsiders.

Keevak begins his history lesson in ancient times. The skin color “yellow” was first attributed to the Jewish population by the Ancient Egyptians, and in some cases Egyptians were later marked as yellow by Romans and other groups. This view identified people as different from the dominant race in society, and they were usually viewed as inferior and even held in servitude. Black men and women were also considered to be inferior compared to the “superior race” at various times; Egyptians, then Romans, and eventually Europeans within white Western nations. During the Renaissance, tales of “the Orient” and India reached Europe and molded views, differentiating Eastern and Western cultures.

Interestingly, Indians told the Europeans that the Chinese were white (since they had large ships and a lot of wealth), and when the first European travelers reached China they also came back and stated that the Chinese were as white as them. Keevak analyzes the history of racism to figure out how deeply rooted the issue lies, which is an important step to combat racism overall. Sadly, the problem seems to always have existed; Keevak shows this by interpreting ancient texts and showing the prevalence of such views throughout history.

In the seventeenth century, the “Asian” image slowly started to change from being as white as the Europeans to being white, but not as white. The key difference was not based on skin color, but because most Asians were not Christians. Even those who converted were not European, so they could never be as white as their European counterparts. This was illustrated by a group of Japanese converts, who settled in what is now the Netherlands but were not completely accepted because of their racial background. God did not bless them as he blessed the European Christians, according to the dominant Western thought at the time (p. 38). Since then, East Asians have been considered olive colored or yellow, with small eyes, smaller stature and rounder face. East Asians included most of Asia, some Middle Eastern regions, Siberia, India, and all the way down to the indigenous of Australia. The most specific were Chinese and Japanese however, since those countries became the two largest powers in the region. This is a significant portion of human history that is enlightening, yet one criticism is that Keevak could have done more to expand this discussion to include categorizations in the nineteenth century. I believe this time period would be useful for understanding how the European “superiority complex” developed in more modern times

Cultural background is important for understanding the significance of particular colors within a given society. In the West, yellow is often attributed to caution or even worry. Nowadays, we can associate the color yellow with a school bus or a stoplight; “caution, kids on board” or “slow down, the light is about to turn red.” Earlier, yellow was associated with yellow fever and more significantly, the

“yellow peril” – the Mongols who conquered the largest amount of territory in history, which originated near China. Europeans were also very cautious and wary about the Chinese and Japanese powers growing immensely, partly because these rising powers were viewed as racially distinct and different. China actually preferred being identified as yellow rather than white as they used to be because being white in Chinese was the color of death, or “pale” nowadays which means sickly. White also held a negative connotation because of the atrocities white men were committing and the Chinese did not want to be associated with that (p. 38). Yellow in China, however, can be considered a great honor because of links to the Yellow Emperor, the Yellow River and the yellow sun which holds a great importance to cultural and religious identities. In Japan from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, being identified as “yellow” was problematic for a variety of reasons. During the industrial revolution, the Japanese wanted to be considered as white as possible to be more related to the European powers. They especially detested being considered the same as the Chinese, since there was growing resentment between the two countries and that identification possibly fueled the tension even more. All of this background is important, yet I believe Keevak’s argument about yellow representing caution in the Western world needed to be expanded upon. Are there connections between those early forms of racism and more current human rights issues, such as genocide? It would be useful to expand upon those linkages in more detail.

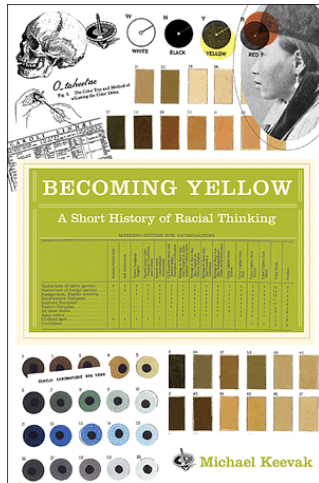
Keevak noted how previous forms of racism re-appeared in later political discussions and debates. The idea of the yellow peril, which was attributed to Attila the Hun from Mongolia, was resurrected in more modern framings of China and Japan. The Europeans became very wary of Japan when it defeated the Chinese in the Sino-Japanese War and then Russia just a decade later. They feared the Chinese, too, because China had around 40 percent of the world population (even if the country was not nearly as industrialized or well-governed as the Japanese in the early 1900s). During the same time period, scientific exploration and the establishment of racial class were important social issues.

Scientists of this time, incorrectly and almost universally, argued that skin color determined things like intelligence and beauty. White people were said to have larger skulls, which displayed more intelligence, and white facial and body features represented a better-looking individual. Some scientists argued that the Chinese were born as beautiful, white babies and then “became uglier, fatter, and darker as they grew older” (p. 30). The racial hierarchy framed white as superior, then yellow, then red (Native Americans and some Middle Eastern), and lastly black. Not only was this racial schema (which was invented by the white male) “scientifically” proven at this time, but it legitimized slavery, discrimination, and mistreatment of people.

I believe this racial hierarchy has affected us in modern times, with many people basing their insults on similar beliefs and criteria, and Keevak could have explored this more in his book. Racism has provoked wars, hostility, and genocide. Japan, for instance, seemed to have a racial superiority complex that contributed to actions during World War II, when the Japanese state murdered, raped, and committed various inhumane acts on the Chinese people. The Nazis tried to annihilate the Jewish people during the Holocaust for racist reasons, and today we see Muslims targeted around the world often along racial lines. In the 1994 Rwandan genocide, ethnic categorization played a central role in the killing of almost one million people; Hutus and Tutsis were differentiated by different nose sizes and other facial features, in part because of Belgian colonizers and their methods for categorizing natives.

The issue of racism runs deep, and a lot of its history was well-elaborated and presented by Keevak in *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking*. I believe this kind of history must be analyzed and discussed in order to stop future conflict from happening. This book is a well-researched, thought-out account that explains how science has been manipulated to form false hypotheses in order to enslave and discriminate against entire populations – in this case, it was mostly directed at East Asians. Keevak’s analysis is a useful tool for educating people about racism and hopefully stopping future violence, including genocide and widespread social injustice. It is a reminder that race is defined

by people, and that cultures are often de-sensitized; this process makes it all too easy to consider certain groups as essentially non-human.



Book Information

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